

# An Activity that Works: Today's Report

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*By Xie Yali*

The primary goal for beginning elementary-stage English majors at Anhui Normal University is to develop basic linguistic and communicative competence.

To achieve this end in the comprehensive English course, we have applied the balanced activities approach so that students can benefit from an all-round development of the four language skills. Among the various activities adopted, Today's Report turns out to be very practical and effective.

Today's Report is given by one student, in English, during the first five to ten minutes of each class. Since the student is required to give the report in English, much preparation is required. To prepare for the report, the student may listen to news reports on the BBC and/or VOA or watch CCTV English News Service. The student may also consult English periodicals such as The World of English or The 21st Century or any book available that is relevant and interesting. The student then selects a topic and draws up a brief outline of the report. The next step is to give the report to the class. After delivering the report, the student asks the class questions about the report. At the end of the activity, the teacher comments on the report and the student's presentation.

## **Today's Report Motivates the Students**

As we all know, "well begun is half done," and a good lead-in paves the way for the successful conduct of a class. Today's Report, given by a different student and covering new materials each time, is very likely to attract attention. Here "Be quiet" is not needed. The speaker who is in front of the class on the lecture platform becomes the center of attention. Everybody participates voluntarily. The enlivened atmosphere in the beginning makes it possible for the whole class to get highly involved. My experience over the years has suggested that Today's Report is an infallible lead-in to a well-conducted class and a motivating warm-up activity.

## **Today's Report Links to the World**

Today's Report provides students with the opportunity to be exposed to the English language on various subjects and in different forms. We have always believed that many minds are better than one.

Today's Report can take several different forms such as humor, stories, news reports, current affairs, commentary, speech delivery, poetry recitation, and even improvised speeches at the request of the listeners.

And in terms of the subjects or topics of the reports, the students often have amazingly brilliant ideas. If at the beginning of a new term, student A reports about his winter vacation, then the coming finals may lead to student B's talk about her stress and tension over exams and her expectations for working hard to get good results. If student C presents a VOA news story on Bosnia-Herzegovina, it is not surprising to hear student D report the next day on the recent development of the Fourth Women's Conference of the World held in Beijing.

Students also tend to concentrate on subjects closely related to cultural events and the sports world. So there are times when we listen to the reports on pop music (for example, one student focused on "Why I love the song 'My Deskmate Girl'," an introduction to jazz, a review of The Bridges of Madison County, and the saddening news of China's football team beaten again by South Korea. Today's Report has opened a window between the class and the colorful world.

Not only have students had their minds refreshed by the ever-changing subjects, the reports have also contributed to improving their speaking and listening skills. They must listen, comprehend, digest, and respond. Therefore, the whole process involves the active participation of the speaker (reporter) and the listener.

## **Today's Report Challenges Students**

Short as it is, Today's Report is no easy task to carry out. Freshmen, in particular, often find it difficult to get up enough courage to speak before a small audience, even though they may be fully prepared for the material they are going to use. On the other hand, the listeners, who usually are very poor in listening comprehension, also are very anxious as they try to understand the report. Most freshmen feel that giving Today's Report is really very demanding and challenging when they give it for the first time.

With the passage of time, students are offered more chances to face their classmates and speak. Every student gives the report approximately four to five times each semester. This and other learning activities enable them to get over timidity and improve their listening and speaking skills. Today's Report inculcates a spirit of hard work and competition, for the students are constantly reminded that what they have achieved is far from perfect. Because Today's Report provides everyone a very good opportunity to show what has been learned, the students make every effort to do a good job.

Today's Report has been used for nearly 10 years and is very popular with our students. It has been and will continue to be an inseparable part of our Comprehensive English course adopting the balanced activities approach.

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